



File Code: 1950
Date: August 12, 2016

Dear Interested Citizen

On August 19, 2016 I made available a draft Decision Notice (DN) and final environmental assessment to authorize Alternative 2 of the Melvin Butte Vegetation Management Project located on the Sisters Ranger District, Deschutes National Forest.

Background for the Decision

My decision would maintain and restore forest resiliency and forest health to provide habitat for interior forest species such as the Northern spotted owl and reduce the hazard of large scale wildfires on about 4,469 acres of National Forest System lands located on the Sisters Ranger District. There has been a departure of forests in the project area from the Historic Range of Variability (HRV). The HRV provides a baseline to compare the existing condition of forests in the Melvin Butte project area to what occurred historically and provides guidance for forest ecosystem restoration. Treatments such as thinning from below and prescribed burning would create conditions that move forests in the project area towards the HRV over the long-term and help meet the purpose and need for action. The project area is about 5,375 acres in size.

The greatest departure from the HRV is in large ponderosa pine; about 90% of the project area was once dominated by ponderosa pine across most plant association groups. Species composition is also outside the HRV with an overall increase in grand/white fir at the expense of ponderosa pine regeneration; about 75% of the project area is dominated by small trees less than 20 inches diameter at breast height (dbh).

Silvicultural treatments and the use of prescribed fire would move the project area towards the desired future condition for forested vegetation. Treatments include the thinning of plantations using variable density thinning techniques (creating "gappy, patchy, clumpy" conditions); dwarf mistletoe treatments; prescribed fire only treatments; thinning from below in old growth ponderosa pine stands; thinning from below in second-growth ponderosa pine stands; thinning from below with small group openings in the mixed conifer plant association group (retaining all old growth ponderosa pine where present); and treatments to meet the objectives for the Scenic Views land allocation. All snags would be retained unless they are an OSHA safety hazard. Secondary treatments include mastication/mowing of shrubs and the use of prescribed fire.

My decision would decommission about 8 miles of road and close about 6 miles of road. Alternative 2 would construct about 0.80 miles of temporary roads to access stands for silvicultural treatment; temporary roads would be closed and restored after use.



The primary land allocation in the Melvin Butte project area is the Matrix land allocation as defined in the Northwest Forest Plan; all thinning treatments in the project area take place in the Matrix. The project area does not contain the Late Successional Reserve (LSR) land allocation. No Riparian Reserves would be treated in the project area.

The project area contains a designated Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) as described in the *Greater Sisters Country Community Wildfire Protection Plan*. The WUI basically follows Forest Road 16 south from the city of Sisters to the Three Creek Lakes basin, a popular and highly used recreation destination on the Sisters Ranger District. Treatments such as thinning from below to remove ladder fuels and prescribed burning in the WUI would reduce hazardous fuels adjacent to Forest Road 16 and provide for the safe ingress of fire suppression resources and the safe egress of the public in the event of a wildfire. Alternative 2 would also reduce fire hazard across the project area from a current high of around 44% of the project acres to a low of around 7%. This is important because the project area has some of the last remaining mixed conifer forest in that portion of the Ranger District, especially after the 26,584 acre Pole Creek fire of 2012.

My decision includes two site-specific Forest Plan amendments as described in the final environmental assessment. The use of amendments to existing standards and guidelines follow guidance contained in the 1982 Planning Rule at 36 CFR 219.7 – Effective Dates and Transition. First, Scenic Views standard and guideline M9-27 would be amended to allow the visual effects of slash clean-up and fuels reduction for approximately a five year period. Second, Scenic Views standard and guideline M9-90 would be amended to allow for prescribed burn units to exceed the five acre minimum, where necessary, and allow tree canopy scorch height to exceed the 30% minimum in some areas. These amendments are needed to allow for operational flexibility and to meet the purpose and need for action.

The project area is located within the *Deschutes Collaborative Forest Project Area, Deschutes Skyline Landscape*, which was selected by the Secretary of Agriculture and an advisory committee in 2010 as a Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration project. The Melvin Butte Vegetation Management Project was initially presented to the Deschutes Collaborative Landscape Restoration Project steering committee in March 2014. The Melvin Butte planning team worked closely with members of the collaborative working group, in office settings and in the field, to find common ground and discuss issues related to forest health and resiliency and other resource concerns. The collaborative also developed silvicultural treatment recommendations that were incorporated into project planning. A letter of support for Alternative 2 was received from the collaborative steering committee on July 15, 2016.

The project was fully documented in an environmental assessment that was prepared according to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The final environmental assessment, draft decision notice, along with other supporting documentation, can be found at the Deschutes National Forest project web page at the following address:

http://data.ecosystem-management.org/nepaweb/nepa_project_exp.php?project=44107

Predecisional Administrative Review Process

This project is subject to pre-decisional administrative review pursuant to 36 CFR 218, Subpart B. Also called the "objection process" the predecisional administrative review process replaced the appeal process in March 2013. The primary difference with the objection process is that a person may object to a project prior to the final decision, whereas under the appeal procedures, appeals were made after the decision. The full text of the rule can be found here: <http://federaleregulations.us/cfr/title/5/28/2013/title36/chapterII/part218>.

Only individuals or organizations that submitted specific written or oral comments during a designated opportunity for public participation (scoping or the 30 day public comment period) may object (36 CFR 218.5). Notices of objection must meet the requirements of 36 CFR 218.8. Objections can be submitted in writing, either electronically or in hard copy but must be filed with the Reviewing Officer within 45 days from the date of publication of notice of the opportunity to object in The Bulletin, Bend, OR. The publication date is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an objection. Those wishing to file an objection to this decision should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Incorporation of documents by reference is not allowed, except for the following list of items that may be referenced by including date, page, and section of the cited document, along with a description of its content and applicability to the objection: 1) all or any part of a federal law or regulation; 2) Forest Service directives and land management plans; 3) documents referenced by the Forest Service in the subject environmental assessment; or 4) comments previously provided to the Forest Service by the objector during public involvement opportunities for the proposed project where written comments were requested by the responsible official. All other documents must be included with the objection.

Issues raised in objections must be based on previously submitted specific written comments regarding the proposed project or activity and attributed to the objector, unless the issue is based on new information that arose after the opportunities for comment. The burden is on the objector to demonstrate compliance with this requirement for objection issues.

Minimum requirements of an objection are described at 218.8(d). An objection must include a description of those aspects of the proposed project addressed by the objection, including specific issues related to the proposed project; if applicable, how the objector believes the environmental analysis or draft decision specifically violates law, regulation, or policy; suggested remedies that would resolve the objection; supporting reasons for the reviewing officer to consider; and a statement that demonstrates the connection between prior specific written comments on the particular proposed project or activity and the content of the objection, unless the objection concerns an issue that arose after the designated opportunities for comment.

Objections may be filed at the following locations:

- **Postal Delivery:** *Reviewing Officer, Pacific Northwest Region, USDA Forest Service , Attn: 1570 Appeals and Objections, PO Box 3623, Portland, Oregon 97208-3623;*
- **Emailed to:** objections-pnw-regional-office@fs.fed.us. Please put OBJECTION and the project name in the subject line. Electronic objections must be submitted as part of an actual e-mail message, or as an attachment in Microsoft Word (.doc), rich text format (.rtf), or portable document format (.pdf) only. E-mails submitted to addresses other than the ones listed above or in formats other than those listed above or containing viruses will

be rejected. It is the responsibility of the objector to confirm receipt of objections submitted by electronic mail. For electronically mailed objections, the sender should normally receive an automated electronic acknowledgement from the agency as confirmation of receipt. If the sender does not receive an automated acknowledgement of receipt, it is the sender's responsibility to ensure timely receipt by other means;

- Hand deliveries: *Pacific Northwest Regional Office, 1220 SW 3rd Ave., Portland, Oregon 97204*. Hand deliveries can occur between 8:00 AM and 4:30 PM, Monday through Friday except legal holidays; or
- Faxed to: *Regional Forester, Attn: 1570 Appeals and Objections at (541) 383-5553*.

For further information regarding the Melvin Butte project or the predecisional administrative review process please contact Michael Keown, Team Leader/Environmental Coordinator, at (541) 549-7735 or mkeown@fs.fed.us.

Thank you for your interest in forest ecosystem management on the Sisters Ranger District.

Sincerely,



JOHN ALLEN
Forest Supervisor